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Aesthetic Criticism in Canada: Its Aims, Methods and Status

By J. D. LOGAN, M.A., Ph.D. (Harvard)

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Aesthetic Criticism in Canada

Aesthetic Criticism in Canada: Its Aims, Methods and Status

Being a Short Propaedeutic to the Appreciation of
the Fine Arts and the Writing of Criticism, on
Literature, Painting and Dramatic and Musical
: : : Performances : : :

By

J. D. LOGAN, M.A., PH.D. (Harvard)

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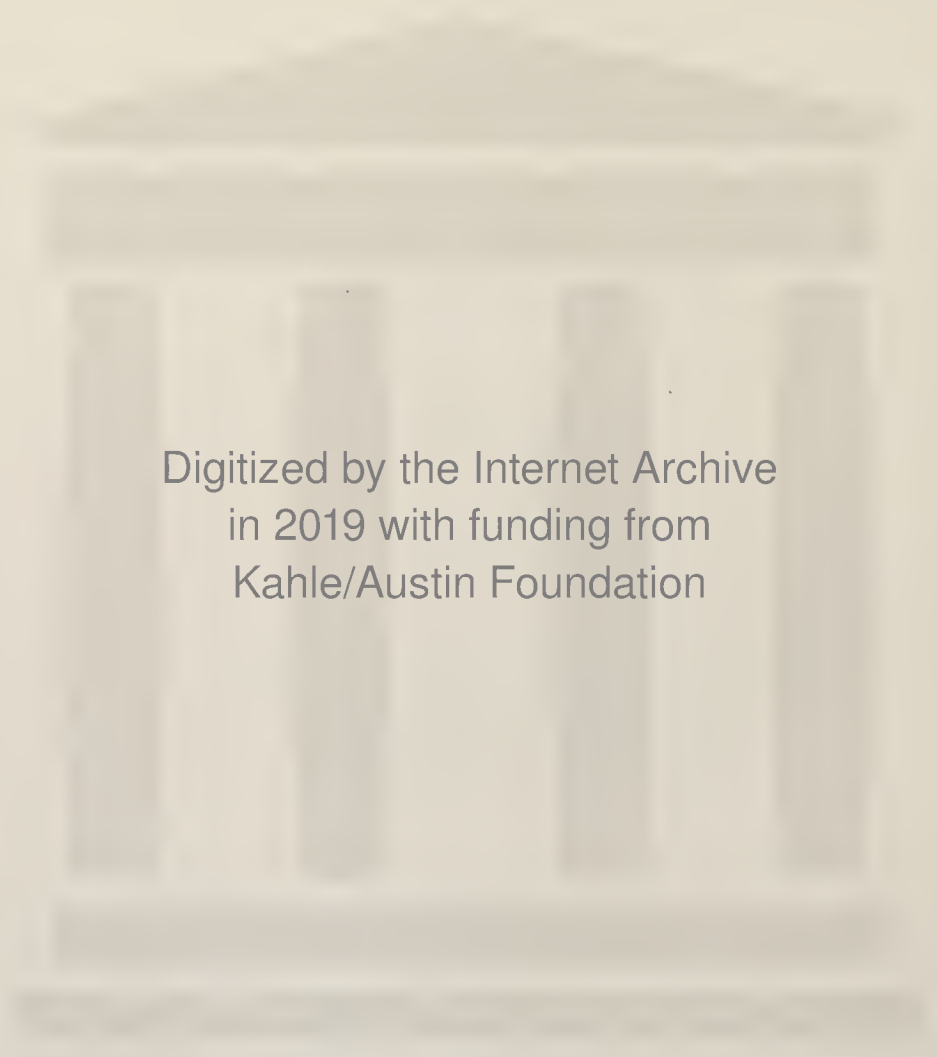
TO
NEWTON MACTAVISH,
ILLUMINATING CRITIC OF THE GRAPHIC ARTS,

A. CURTIS WILLIAMSON, R.C.A.,
MASTER PAINTER,

AND

R. H. HATHAWAY,
LOVER OF THE LITERARY ARTS AND CONNOISSEUR:

THREE LOYAL FRIENDS WHO HAVE DONE MUCH
TO PROMOTE AESTHETIC CULTURE IN CANADA
AND FROM WHOM I HAVE LEARNED
MORE THAN I CAN RETURN.



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PREFACE

THE following essay is addressed primarily, if not wholly, to my compatriots, to the cultured amongst the Canadian people. It is an essay as much in social psychology as in criticism, since it discloses, for the first time, or in a new way for the first time, certain facts in the aesthetic genius and history of the Canadian people. But as an essay it is not in itself a venture in *belles-lettres*. For it aims wholly to be pedagogic and pragmatic: namely, to recall to the consciousness of the people of this young country, Canada, the importance and need of aesthetic criticism, to orientate some of the relations obtaining between criticism and the development of the fine arts, and to signalize the method of criticism that, at the current stage of Canadian civilization, will best promote aesthetic culture and the distribution of aesthetic standards amongst the people of the Dominion. In short, the essay aims to give to a people notably intolerant of foreign criticism of their civilization and culture a *new method of self-criticism*, with which they may, on their own initiative, coolly and sanely reflect on the status and tendencies of their culture, and, thus seeing themselves as others see them, reasonably and cheerfully turn to observe right standards of aesthetic appreciation and to democratize good taste in all the fine arts.

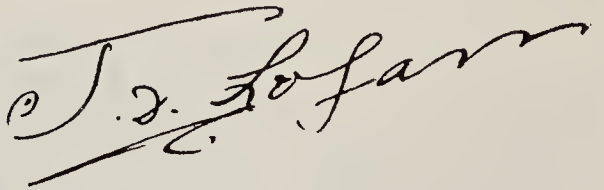
The best way to invite my compatriots to conduct this free examination of their aesthetic civilization and culture was, it seemed to me, to write the following brief essay in *criticism of criticism* in Canada. Such an essay, I felt, would perform a double service. First, it would cause Canadian critics themselves to consider how loyally they were employing their own function, and, if need be, to correct their aims and methods. Secondly, it would encourage Canadians who sincerely wish to enhance their powers of aesthetic appreciation or to refine their taste, to read native criticism with respect and grateful acceptance of its appraisals, comments, and recommendations.

PREFACE

The essay, therefore, is to be regarded as a summary pro-paedeutic solely to Constructive Criticism in Canada.

What is Constructive Criticism? Essays in appreciations of literature, painting, sculpture, music, and other arts and crafts are criticism; but they are not—at least not necessarily—constructive criticism. They are self-contained, an end-in-themselves, written to give aesthetic delight, enjoyed for their own sake. Such criticism is itself fine art, *belles-lettres*. Constructive criticism, on the other hand, is an applied science, or a craft rather than an art. It has a threefold aim. Objectively, it discloses what is good or bad, better or worse (and sometimes what is right or wrong) in a work of literary, graphic, plastic, or tonal art. It does not, however, disclose these merely for their own sake, but rather as a *discovery* of some *new way* in which the art of an author, painter, sculptor, or composer may be appraised and appreciated. Subjectively, constructive criticism aims, first, to purge taste, and, secondly, to increase the range and power of aesthetic appreciations. Constructive Criticism, then, must not be conceived as the opposite of Destructive Criticism, but rather as fresh, novel, and striking discoveries of the virtues and shortcomings in a work of art—for the extrinsic purposes of purging taste and of enlarging the scope and power of aesthetic appreciations. The following essay is, in that sense and intention, as essay in Constructive Criticism as distinguished from Interpretive Criticism.

April, 1917.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "J. D. Lofgren". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned to the right of the date.

Aesthetic Criticism in Canada

I.—INTRODUCTION

THE aesthetic taste, appreciations, and standards of a people, in order that these may be kept genuine, refined, dignified, spiritually sustaining or elevating, always need, as it were, careful "mothering." All the more does this necessity obtain in a young country, as, for instance, Canada, where civilization naturally is somewhat inchoate, and where, therefore, aesthetic taste and standards inevitably are, in general and for the most part, ill-begotten in form, vulgar in manifestation, and ephemeral or trivial in value.

To criticism belongs the function of "mothering" a people's taste and standards in literature and in the graphic, plastic, and tonal arts. In an old country, as in England or in France, the exercise of this function must be Athenian, rather than Spartan, in method and aim. That is to say: in a country which has long possessed established standards of genuine taste and of fine artistry, criticism itself must be aesthetic—polite (in the French sense), distinterested, humane, engaging with a sweet reasonableness, and delightful in itself. This is the justification and value of all essays in pure criticism and *belles-lettres*, as, for instance, the essays of Saint Beuve, Arnold, Brunetière, Pater, Arthur Symonds, Gilbert Chesterton, and James Huneker: these essays themselves are literature; they have intrinsic aesthetic charm; and, irrespective of mere truth of point or contention, make delectable reading. In a young country, such as Canada, the "mothering" of aesthetic taste and standards must be Spartan, rather than Athenian, in method and aim. That is to say: in a country where the people are, perforce, primarily concerned with material possessions, and only secondarily with spiritual goods, criticism must be rigorously pragmatic and pedagogic: while, in the first place, it declares this or that to be a bad or a good performance in literature, painting, drama, or music, it must also, in the second place, be constructive by a reasonable justification, according to established standards, of a piece of criticism, and

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thus hold up the ideal and point the better way both to the artistic craftsman and to the public.

Now, it should be obvious that in a country having a relatively inchoate civilization, criticism, though sincere, will be "young-eyed"—that it will be pragmatic, settle right down to the business of speaking its mind, without having clear, philosophical vision of its proper function and methods, and of the hierarchy of values according to which it justly may declare the work of a given poet, novelist, dramatist, painter, musical composer, or other artist to be good, bad, or indifferent. Further: in a young country, criticism, forgetting, as it does and will, that all things are good or bad, right or wrong, only relatively, not absolutely, will fail to observe the historic process in the evolution of civilizations, and will, therefore, tend to make a poem, novel, painting, musical composition, or other work of art appear absolutely good or absolutely bad. Praise will be high, and condemnation will be severe: criticism, even while aiming to be, and remaining, sincerely pedagogic, will not be, or will tend not to be, sane, balanced, impersonal, sympathetic and constructive. Consequently, in a young country eventually there will arise a necessity for the *criticism of criticism*.

The evolution of culture in Canada has at length caused that necessity to show its head. The time for criticism in the Dominion to become self-critical has arrived. But before this can become real and effective, there must be some sort of propaedeutic to the history, aims, methods, and status of criticism in Canada. The present essay is meant to be a brief propaedeutic to the criticism of criticism in the Dominion.

II.—LITERARY AND PICTORIAL CRITICISM

At the outset I observe two singular facts concerning criticism in Canada. First, it is almost impossible for one who is competent for the function to be an independent, sincere, honest, and helpful critic of nativistic literature (verse and prose) and painting, and of dramatic and musical performances and compositions. It is almost impossible, I mean, to be such a kind of genuine critic, and, at the same time, to be happy in the exercise of the function, and to have one's sincere and, in intention, helpful criticisms gratefully appreciated. Secondly, in Canada the criticism of literary verse and prose and of painting differs from that of the drama and of music in history, aims, methods, and status, and the former must be considered separately from the latter. In what follows I shall adopt the foregoing grouping, and treat in sequence the criticism of literature and of painting, and, next, the criticism of the acted drama and of music, sung and performed.

It happens that, in Canada, one can be, virtually, an independent, happy, and gratefully received critic of literature and of painting, for the reason that these are not popular arts as such. The criticism of what is really fine literature and fine painting—that is, the critical appreciation of the strictly literary elements and qualities of a poem or work of prose and of the strictly pictorial elements and qualities of a painting—is so mediate, refined, and recondite as to require very special training, or, as it were, long spiritual commerce with genuine works of literature and of pictorial art. The strictly literary appeal in a poem or romance and the strictly pictorial appeal in a painting are not immediate enough to be apprehended and appreciated by the senses and imagination of the uninitiated ordinary public. The really fine and the really beautiful—"harmonia" and "kosmiotes," as Plato called them—in a work of literature or in a painting are quite beyond the education, culture, and faculties of the so-called masses. In literature, the merely pretty, the sentimental, the

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homely-pathetic, the cruelty of love with the happy ending, the raucously humorous, the sensational, the scandalous or the picaresque readily—and only—delight and satisfy the proletariat. In pictorial art, anything outside of color, form, composition, atmosphere, sheer fine painting, spiritual expression or suggestion, as, for instance, the exact reproduction of what pleased one in real life or in nature, the story in a picture, or the happy or pathetic memories of past experiences recalled, by mental association, from a picture—in short, all that is not *par excellence* the art in a painting—readily—and only—solicits and wins the appreciation of the ordinary visitors to a gallery of pictures.

It is plain, therefore, that a critic may dilate independently and care-free, whether he writes adversely or complementarily, on the strictly literary qualities of a book of poems or a novel and on the strictly pictorial qualities of a painting. For what he writes he will be neither praised nor censured, neither upheld nor attacked, because, in the first place, the ordinary reading and picture-loving (?) public, since their culture and aesthetic preferences are altogether different from his, do not know what he is talking about and do not care what he writes; and because, in the second place, established writers and painters either indulgently patronize or superciliously ignore a critic, unless he himself is one of their own kind—at least potentially a writer or artist himself, who, therefore, really knows intimately the principles, practice, and functions of the arts he is criticizing. This does not mean that a critic of poetry and prose and of painting must himself be an actual “practitioner” of these arts. It means only that unless a critic knows intimately the functions of the literary and the pictorial arts, has a genuine “working acquaintance” with the technical aims and methods of poets, prosemen, and painters, gained somehow by personal experience in the libraries of authors and the studios of artists, and has assiduously studied the works of reputable authors and the pictures in private and public collections, his criticisms are regarded by established writers and artists as, possibly, interesting or entertaining essays in *belles-lettres*—as literature itself, not as genuine and authoritative criticism. I must, however, observe,

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in passing, that this fact—it is not an opinion or contention—obtains saliently in the regard in which criticisms of Canadian nativistic painting are held. With one or two notable exceptions, as we shall see, Canadian art critics are viewed as writing literary, not pictorial, appreciations of pictures and artists.

Having thus noted the status of the critic and of the criticism of the literary and the pictorial arts in Canada, I turn now briefly to consider, first, the history, methods, and aims of literary criticism as practiced in the Dominion. In his admirable monograph on "English-Canadian Literature"—the monograph itself being an excellent work of historico-critical writing—Mr. T. G. Marquis remarks the "dearth" of literary criticism in Canada, and mentions only about a dozen names of resident or native-born Canadians who have essayed genuine critical writing either on general or on nativistic literature or on both. For expository and pedagogic purposes, it will be helpful to group these critical writers into three schools. These are, first, the Pioneer or Traditional School, represented by the late George Stewart, editor of *The Canadian Quarterly*, the late George Murray, literary editor of *The Montreal Star* and of *The Standard*, Dr. John Reade ("R.V." in *Old and New* in the *Montreal Gazette*), and Mr. Martin Griffin (*At Dodsley's* in the *Montreal Gazette*); secondly, the Academic or Dilettante School, represented by Professors Cappon, Queen's University, W. J. Alexander, University of Toronto, Pelham Edgar, University of Toronto, Archibald MacMechan, Dalhousie University, Dr. Andrew MacPhail, editor of *The University Magazine*, and Mr. Arnold Haultain, essayist and biographer; and, thirdly, the Pragmatic or Pedagogic School, represented by Mr. T. G. Marquis, Miss Marjory MacMurchy, Mrs. John W. Garvin (Katherine Hale, pseud.), Mr. Bernard Muddiman, Mr. Donald G. French, and, according to Mr. Marquis's monograph, the present writer. Other critical writers could be included in the three schools; but those noted are salient.

As to the methods and aims of the first two schools—the Traditional and the Academic—in general: Dr. Reade and Mr. Griffin write critically to illuminate universal literature (poetry,

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fiction, drama, social life, and history); the others have, on the whole, the same aim, or they write critical essays as a fine art in the department of *belles-lettres*. Dr. Reade and Mr. Griffin write on literature and life in brief but scholarly journalistic essays; Professors Cappon, Alexander, Edgar, and MacMechan, in monographs (as, for instance, Cappon's fine study of the Poetry of C. G. D. Roberts), or in critical introductions and prefatory essays to selected English men-of-letters (as, for instance, Alexander's admirable *Introduction to Browning* or MacMechan's scholarly introductory essays to his editions of some of Carlyle's works.) Dr. MacPhail and Mr. Haultain, on the other hand, delight in the critical essay for its own sake, and are more solicitous about beauty or dignity of style than about substance or thought. Their essays belong to the department of *belles-lettres*—not always and not essentially, but in tendency, form, and aesthetic charm of style.

Again, in particular: whenever the members of the first two schools write about any phase of the literary history and the literature of Canada, or about any author who has figured notably in that history and literature, they all are rigorously aesthetic, that is to say, unphilosophical and not genuinely critical in the modern pragmatic sense; but the writers of the Traditional School differ from those of the Academic or Dilettante School in their critical attitude to Canadian literature and literary history. Dr. Reade and Mr. Griffin write sympathetically, and with sincere admiration, about phases of Canadian literature; but they show little or no consideration of the historic process in the evolution of Canadian culture, of the continuity of Canadian literary history. How, then, can they be more than merely aesthetic—how can they be genuinely critical, if they have not the philosophic eye, do not look before and after, and thus do not treat the phases of Canadian literature from the point of view of their implied relations to the whole of Canadian life and of English literature, of which, in some degree, Canadian verse and prose form a part? Sympathetically, politely, and charmingly as Dr. Reade has written about the phases of Canadian literature, his criticism, to employ a phrase of M. Jules

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Lemaitre, is "not criticism, but entertaining conversation." Virtually it denies that Canada has a literature strictly as such; that is, a *corpus* of poetry and prose which can be regarded as a real integer, having unity of inspiration and a continuous growth from crude thought and form to respectable aesthetic and artistic dignity. It implies only that in the literature of Canada there are pleasant by-ways which invite the essayist to write of them with aesthetic appreciation. This, I submit, is not philosophical, not genuine, criticism; it is polite, entertaining conversation. For the problem of Canadian literary criticism is not the question whether Canada has produced, intermittently and here and there, some original authors who have composed poetry and prose as aesthetically winning and as artistically beautiful or dignified as that of British and American writers, but whether the Dominion has produced a continuous body of poetry and prose, which, at its best, may justly be considered genuine literature, worthy to be included, as American literature is included, in the general *corpus* of English literature.

On the other hand, while the members of the Academic School, Professors Cappon, Alexander, Edgar, and MacMechan, like Dr. Reade and Mr. Griffin, take the strictly aesthetic attitude to Canadian literature, and show little or no consideration of the historic process in the evolution of Canadian culture, they differ even in aesthetic attitude from their predecessors by being both dogmatic and supercilious towards Canadian prose and poetry. With a dogmatism, which is but intellectual snobbery, either they raise their brows in silent contempt whenever other critics employ the phrase "Canadian literature"; or become cynically patronizing whenever they themselves use the phrase in their lectures and writings, frankly acknowledging that they admit the formula into their utterances only out of courtesy. Ask Professor Alexander, as I once asked him, why he objects to the phrase "Canadian literature," and why he does not include the best Canadian prose and poetry in his university courses as part of his general survey of English literature, though he does include American literature in that survey. He will reply, as he replied to me:—"Canadian literature lacks too much in substance to

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admit it into the general survey of English literature. Some of it is pretty; but most of it lacks substance; the great body of it is not genuine literature." Or, ask Professor MacMechan if Canada has a literature. He will reply, as he once replied in the press to me—"Not as I mean literature." With wearisome iteration to myself, and, no doubt, to others, in *The Canadian Magazine*, in my recent lectures on "The Literary History and the Literature of Canada," delivered at the University of Acadia, Wolfville, Nova Scotia (Dec., 1915), and in other lectures and essays, I have gone to pains to show that while the Dominion has not produced a literature which has always consistent aesthetic beauty and artistic dignity, it has a body of prose and verse which is rich in social ideas, which embodies the growth of Canadian culture and expresses the spirit of Canadian civilization, and which either winningly or compellingly envisages the natural beauties and glories of the Canadian seasons, Canadian skies, seas, prairies, mountains, lakes, streams, vales, and wooded wolds. This body of Canadian poetry and prose, despite its aesthetic defects, I declare indubitably to be genuine literature. Some of the best of it has risen to the dignity of world-literature; all of the best is good literature; and the total body of it is intrinsically and rightfully to be included in the general *corpus* of English literature. I hold to that doctrine—unswervingly.

A consideration of the aims and methods of the Pragmatic School of literary criticism in Canada may be despatched briefly. The members of this school have for their central principle or chief article of faith the proposition that Canada has a worthy body of genuine literature, which is being perennially enhanced in quantity and in quality. For their second principle or article of faith they have the proposition that Canadian literary critics must know more or less intimately the history—the origins, beginnings, and evolution—of Canadian literature. For their third principle or article of faith they have the proposition that the independent, sincere, honest, and really serviceable literary critic to-day must be pragmatic or pedagogic in aim and method. They do not write literary criticism which is meant to be literature itself, intrinsically aesthetic, or pleasantly engaging reading on

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its own account; they call theirs, whether it be a journalistic review or editorial, or a magazine article or essay, *constructive criticism*. It is, in the Greek meaning, pragmatic, because the chief aims of the Canadian constructive critics are, first, to make plain and indubitable to their compatriots and the world that Canada has a respectable literature, aesthetically engaging and artistically beautiful or dignified; and, secondly, to appraise new works of verse and prose and to place them and their authors rightly in the *corpus* and history of Canadian literature. It is also pedagogic, because a third aim of the Canadian constructive critics is to teach the people a decent knowledge of the literary history of Canada and an aesthetic appreciation of Canadian poetry and prose. The members of the Pragmatic School of literary criticism are the champions of a patriotic cause—missionaries, apostles, and even martyrs. They all write with literary dignity, thoughtfully, and, on the whole, convincingly and effectively.

Leaving now, for a trice or so, my own special field, I turn to consider, in the second place, somewhat summarily the methods, aims, and status of pictorial criticism in Canada. I must confess to a very superficial knowledge of the history and development of painting in Canada, although I have studied several of the collections owned by private collectors and connoisseurs, those in the art museums at Toronto, at Montreal and in the National Gallery at Ottawa, the exhibits of the Canadian Art Club, the Ontario Society of Artists and the Royal Canadian Academy, as well as special loaned and private exhibits of paintings, have considerable acquaintance with the studios of Canadian artists and with the painters themselves, and have assiduously read all the literature that I could find dealing with Canadian pictorial art, particularly Mr. Newton MacTavish's intimate, acute, and thoroughly critical essays, in *The Canadian Magazine* and other art periodicals, on Canadian pictorial art and the genius of Canadian painters. I mention these facts for a special purpose. My study of Canadian painting and of pictorial art in general was undertaken in the interest of personal culture and aesthetic theory, not for the profession

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of doctrinaire art criticism. So that whatever articles, editorials, or essays I may have written on Canadian painting, and similar writings of others similarly trained, are not to be regarded as genuine pictorial criticism, but as *literary* appreciations of art, in a phrase, as mere literature.

In Canada, then, as in any other country, criticism of pictorial art may be written by cultured students of aesthetics who use their appreciations as themes for engaging literary essays, or by collectors and connoisseurs, or by painters themselves, or, finally, by professional art critics, duly qualified for the function by the study of pictures and an intimate knowledge of the technique of painting, acquired somehow by personal practice or in the galleries under the tutoring of painters or in the studios after the same manner. Now, there is nothing to be condemned in one's delighting in the function of the students of aesthetics who write engagingly about pictures; only, we must not regard such writing as genuine pictorial criticism: it is not criticism, but polite, entertaining literary conversation about the more obviously objective, immediately appealing, and expressive qualities of paintings. The originator of this mode or method of art criticism in Europe may be said to have been Philostratus, the Elder, of Lemnos, whose *Imagines* are the first formal literary appreciations of pictorial art, being, as they are, descriptions of certain paintings found at Naples in the third century of the Christian era. In our time the practice of writing literary appreciations of pictorial art has the notable example and high authority of such devotees of aestheticism as the late Walter Pater, the late W. E. Henley, Mr. Arthur Symons, and Mr. G. B. Shaw—to mention only the most salient of such critics. It is the only form of art criticism that can at all approach being popular; and when well done, as it is well done, in Canada by Mr. Hector Charlesworth, Mr. Charles McIver, Mr. P. O. Donovan, Mr. A. E. S. Smythe, and Katherine Hale of Toronto, and Mr. S. Morgan-Powell, and Mr. Cecil Wilson Lane of Montreal, it becomes entertaining reading and a genuine cultural agency in developing taste and loyalty to fine aesthetic standards. Criticism of pictorial art by collectors and connoisseurs in Can-

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ada, if it were attempted by, say, Sir Edmund Walker, Mr. E. F. B. Johnston, or Mr. James Wood of Toronto or Mr. E. B. Greenshields of Montreal, while it would show distinct knowledge of the history and technique of modern painting, would, on the whole, be a revelation of private preferences, as, for example, predilections for the works of the painters of certain "schools," the Dutch school or the Brabizon school; and if they deigned to write critically of Canadian nativistic painting, their criticism would tend to be an exhibition of private preferences, and, in method, would conform to the manner of literary appreciations—aesthetic descriptions—of the immediately objective and technical qualities of Canadian paintings.

Genuine pictorial criticism—that is, the critical appreciation of the strictly pictorial elements and qualities in paintings—must, then, be left, in Canada, either to the painters themselves or to critics who are duly qualified for the function by knowledge of the history, technique, and aesthetics of pictorial art in general, and of Canadian painting in particular, and who have notable gifts in literary expression. Yet we may hardly expect genuine pictorial criticism from Canadian painters for two good reasons. Even if such cultured and admirable Canadian painters as Mr. William Brymner, Mr. Curtis Williamson, Mr. Maurice Cullen, Mr. J. W. Morrice, Mr. John Russell, Mr. Horatio Walker, and, not to ignore the ladies, Miss Laura Muntz, and Miss Florence Carlyle, were to essay the writing of pictorial criticism, inevitably they would dilate on a collection of paintings strictly from the point of view of the studio; theirs would be pure technical criticism of the sheer painting in pictures; and just as certain poets appeal only to other poets, by the technical artistry and beauties in their verses, so these cultured and successful Canadian painters whom I have mentioned, if they essayed art criticism, would write strictly esoteric criticism, too technical and recondite to be appreciated save by painters themselves. They could not exercise enough detachment from their studio attitudes to write for universal appreciation. In the second place, as I pointed out elsewhere (p. 11), painters regard pictorial criticism written by anyone who is not somehow a member of their guild as mere

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literature, as curious, though frequently entertaining, essays in *belles-lettres*, and, therefore, prefer to substitute verbal appreciations in the studio or in the galleries for literary expression of their views on paper. As a guild, painters aim to keep their criticism of pictures wholly esoteric, confined amongst themselves and not to universalize the appreciation or knowledge of it in written articles, essays, or books. At any rate, this is notably so in Canada.

Now, the ideal critic of pictorial art must be a gifted and trained writer like Mr. D. S. McColl of London, Mr. Philip Hale of Boston, Mr. James Huneker or Mr. Bernard Berenson of New York. In Canada there is one gentleman who measures up to the ideal, who writes genuine pictorial criticism—that is to say, criticism based on intimate knowledge of the history and technique of painting, and on the gifts in literary expression necessary to universalize the public appreciation of what he writes. Mr. Newton MacTavish knows thoroughly the history and development of the graphic arts in Canada (I learn that he is engaged in writing an authoritative *History of Art in the Dominion*); he has long been a close student of the technique of painting and the other graphic arts; and he is recognized in England and in the United States as the one authoritative art critic in Canada. His essays on Canadian art and artists in *The Canadian Magazine*, which, in this respect, make that periodical rank with *The Century*, *Scribner's Magazine*, and *Harper's Magazine* in the United States, and his essays in other American and English art periodicals combine in just balance and hierarchy all the appeals of the student of aesthetic theory, of the collector and connoisseur, of the painter, and of the literary artist as such. Mr. MacTavish's art criticism is unsophisticated, though knowing and thorough; disinterested, though direct and pointed; impersonal, though not aloof; humane, though just; and readable, though refined in literary expression. It is, in short, the one notable example of authentic pictorial criticism in Canada.

III.—DRAMATIC AND MUSICAL CRITICISM

I proceed now to consider the methods, aims, and status of dramatic and of musical criticism in Canada. Here, and more particularly in the latter case, I am again in my own special field. I remark what I observed early in this essay (p. 9), that a critic of dramatic and of musical performances and compositions hardly can be independent, sincere, honest, and, at the same time, happy in the exercise of these otherwise delectable functions. At any rate, to be such a kind of critic is a daring undertaking. The acted drama and performed music are *par excellence* the popular arts. They are the specifically popular arts, because, in the first place, they appeal directly, immediately, in many ways, to the senses of sight and tone, to the nervous and vaso-motor systems, to the sentiments, and to the sexual instincts. Again: they are the specifically popular arts, because, in the second place, the acted drama and performed music are the two thoroughly socialized arts; the classes and the masses, the uncultivated and the cultivated, freely and equally meet together to enjoy drama and music, and they enhance that enjoyment by public applause, which, because applause is the outward expression of emotion, is contagious and infectious, causes the ensemble of spectators and auditors, rich and poor, cultured and uncultured alike, sympathetically to show forth their pleasure and delight. In all cases, save one, "the public," or "the people" is an absurd figment; for there are all sorts of publics. But in the theatre and in the concert-hall, representatives of the entire body of men and women of a community meet together for aesthetic and social enjoyment; the acted drama and performed music are truly the people's arts. Moreover, on account of the many appeals, sensuous, neural, motor, sentimental, emotional, and sexual and social, of drama and of music to the average consciousness, the people hold to their appreciations of a tragedy or a comedy and of solo or of concerted music with the same tenacity and warmth that they hold to their politics and religion.

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The dramatic or the musical critic, therefore, who means to be independent, sincere, honest, and helpful by aiming to refine taste and to raise the standard of aesthetic appreciation will find himself placed between Scylla and Charybdis. The public, cultured and uncultured, will resent criticism of their appreciations of drama and music with the same warmth or pugnacity that they resent criticism of their politics and religion. Before the theatre-going or the music-loving public, the dramatic or the musical critic is face to face with Scylla. Again: the proprietors of theatres, managers of theatrical companies, players and playwrights, managers of concert-halls, impressarios, musical composers, soloists, and orchestral and choral conductors regard a dramatic or a musical critic as a nuisance and, sometimes, as an enemy—unless, as one of the insurgent critics in New York put it, he is “hypocritically affectionate” in his writings about contemporary theatrical and concert-hall performances. Caught in the whirlpools of the aspersions, animadversions, and even insults of all these “influential” persons, the dramatic or the musical critic finds himself in the smothering waters of Charybdis. What shall be the eventual issue? Either a dramatic or a musical critic must remain independent, and unhappily exercise his function; or he must become a “reporter of fact”—simply describing the who, when, where, what and how of a dramatic or a musical performance, never evaluating according to established standards the excellences of the one or the other, and never disclosing the defects of the one or the other. But if he elects to be a reporter of fact, he may achieve a cheap notoriety and an inflated reputation as an invaluable critic by being hypocritically affectionate in appraising dramatic and musical performances.

Now, it happens that Mr. Hector Charlesworth of Toronto can be, as he is indeed, an independent and honest dramatic critic, because he is, indubitably and admittedly, the best informed, most experienced, most studious, most skilful, impersonal, and authoritative critic of the theatre in Canada; because the chief periodical for which he writes stands for independence of advertising patronage from theatres, and asks for untrammelled criticism

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from him; and because his criticisms of plays and players, for the most part, appear in his chief medium *after* a play either has concluded its productions on the local stage, or is so near to the close of its local "run" that what he has to say of a play and the players, whether adverse or appreciative, makes, at the time, no difference in the size of the audiences and in the box office receipts, and, if adverse, has no disintegrating effect, as it would have if it appeared at the beginning of the run, on the *morale* and the histrionic artistry of the players. To this last matter I shall return in a moment. Again: Mr. S. Morgan-Powell of Montreal can be an independent dramatic critic, because, in the first place, the English-speaking citizens of that bilingual city are not so assiduous and so serious devotees of the acted drama as the people of Toronto, and go to see a play, or do not, on the degree of incitement created by the "advance" press notices of a play, not on that created by the Tuesday newspaper criticisms of the Monday night performance; and, because, in the second place, Mr. Morgan-Powell has in the patrons of the theatres in Montreal a majority of readers who like the traditional English method of a critic's expressing frankly how he feels and what he thinks about a play and the players, and of coloring his criticism with personal reminiscences, historical references, comparisons with past performances and players or with other plays and players, and the spice of persiflage. This is Mr. Morgan-Powell's method. It is smart, clever, and frequently ingenious and informing, and it all makes good reading; but it is not formal, serious, authentic criticism after the manner in which Mr. Charlesworth writes independent, authentic dramatic criticism. Mr. Charlesworth writes serious criticism to be seriously read and heeded. Mr. Morgan-Powell writes piquant criticism to amuse or to entertain his special "clientele," and he cares not a whit for either the recognition or the aspersions of the theatre and company managers and less for those of the players. In short, in Montreal nobody takes to heart what a dramatic critic writes about a play and the players. His criticisms will be read, enjoyed,—and forgotten, whether they are adverse, kindly, or persiflaginous. In any case,

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the theatre-going citizens of Montreal patronize a play or do not—according as they themselves independently feel about it. Thus in Montreal a dramatic critic is immune from all outside aspersions and hamperings, and can be fearless and honest, because amongst the theatre patrons of that city he is regarded as essentially a humorist or as an entertainer.

I have signalized Mr. Charlesworth and Mr. Morgan-Powell as the two leading dramatic critics in Canada who can be, as they are indeed, independent of the recognition or of the animadversions of the public, the box office, the managers of theatrical companies, the players, and the playwrights, and still be happy in the exercise of their function. Mr. Charlesworth can be so, in virtue of his long, outstanding reputation as the foremost and indubitably authoritative dramatic critic in Canada and of his unique journalistic connection. Mr. Morgan-Powell can be so, in virtue of the fact that his dramatic criticisms, while clever, and frequently ingenious and informing, are, on the whole, received as a novel kind of humor and of piquant intellectual entertainment.

How, then, stand the rest of those in Canada who essay the criticism of contemporary plays and players? On the whole, they are reduced to the status of, as the phrase goes, "reportorial critics." They may, however, seemingly or deceptively appear genuinely critical by being hypocritically affectionate in writing about a dramatic performance, or by confining their criticisms to aspersions on insignificant bits of stage "business" the properties and other mechanical features of the production, by suggesting that certain business and patter be censored and certain sections of a play be cut or revised; to which we may add, though this, as I shall show is taboo, recommendations for improving the "work" of the minor members of the cast. But, on the whole, as I said, they must remain "reportorial critics"—merely describing all the aspects of a dramatic performance, from the box office receipts and the size of the audience to the quantity of the applause and recalls and the comments overheard in the lobby.

In this matter I write with truth and authority; for I draw

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principally on my own experience while Dramatic and Musical Editor of the *Daily News*, Toronto. By using an episode from that experience I am able clearly to explain what I meant when I said, as I did on page 20, that Mr. Charlesworth can write, as he does, independent dramatic criticism, for the reason that his criticism, so far as the local run of a play is concerned, will have no temporarily disintegrating effect on the *morale* and the histrionic artistry of the players. Also, by that episode I shall be able to show that and how a dramatic critic is trammelled by theatrical powers that are determined to limit, if not to destroy, his independence, sincerity, and honesty as a critic, and is practically forced to be hypocritically affectionate in his writings about plays and players.

I once wrote an adverse criticism of a play which was produced in Toronto; and after my criticism was read, I was anything but kindly received by the proprietor of the theatre, by the manager of the company, and by certain of the players. I asked the manager of the company to explain to me what critical misdemeanor I had committed that I should be frowned at and avoided as if I were a pestilence. I inquired whether what I had written about the play and the players was true or not. He admitted that it was truth. I then replied that if it was true, I had good right to publish my criticism, both for the advantage of the public and for the improvement and future success of the play and the players.

"No," said he, "you had no right to do so. For, in the first place, the people of a city take their cue whether to patronize a play or not from the opinions, comments, and gossip of such theatre-goers, especially the 'first-nighters,' as have attended the play—from the general 'talk' about a dramatic performance, which somehow mysteriously becomes noised abroad in a city, and not from the newspaper criticisms; and, because, in the second place, whatever effect, good or bad from the box office point of view, a critic's review of a play may have on the public, the newspaper criticisms, if adverse, or even if favorable but with some of the players ignored, completely disintegrates united and artistic effort on the part of the acting members of the

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company. If one player is criticized adversely, or even if he or she is not mentioned along with the others in a newspaper review, that one player takes the criticism or the fancied slight or omission so much to heart, is so mentally and emotionally perturbed, that the player spoils the *morale* and the histrionic artistry of the other members of the cast; and thus tends to cause the play to fail in making a good impression on the audience or a 'popular hit,' and the theatre and the company to lose in financial receipts. An unfavorable criticism may or may not keep the public away from a play; but it certainly works considerable harm to coherent, artistic acting on the part of the players, prevents the players and the play from being seen at their best, and insidiously makes against the play's being both a dramatic and a financial success. It may mean ruin, locally, for all persons involved in the productions.

"A right-minded, a knowing and sympathetic critic, who appreciates all the difficulties of a successful dramatic production, will, therefore, put his literary 'spot light' on the strong points of a drama, on the excellences of the principals, of the production in general, and of the sets and the mechanical effects; and where occasion really calls for mention of players in minor *rôles*, he will make himself sure that those thus selected for mention are not likely, by vanity or other human frailty, to create jealousy amongst the other members of the cast in minor *rôles*—all the while being careful, in what he writes, to ignore or to 'write around' the defects of the play and the players. Finally, instead of 'sizing up' the dramatic success of a play from his private impressions, reflections and aesthetic principles, a critic will take his cue as to its success from the applause, recalls, lobby and box office comments, and report the facts in popular journalese in colored literary expression."

In general, as a matter of fact the foregoing method of dramatic criticism is the one practised by the critics in Canada. Occasionally, however, a play is so obviously incoherent in structure, so trivial in theme, so pointless in appeal, and the players so unequal in histrionic artistry, that the aesthetic conscience even of the most conniving or sympathetic critic is compelled, out of

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self-respect, loyalty to the critical function, and a sense of fairness or of duty to the public, to express itself unequivocally and indignantly in forthright, adverse criticism.

This, then, is the status of dramatic criticism in Canada: rarely is it independent, sincere, honest, and genuinely helpful; on the contrary, it is, for the most part, reportorial in method, and hypocritically affectionate in spirit. As genuine, authentic, constructive criticism, it is, in the large, as near to that ideal as the epistles which little children write to Santa Claus, or as the essays in English composition written by university undergraduates are to literature.

As to the methods, aims, and status of musical criticism in Canada: all that I have said here about dramatic criticism applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to the former. But there are certain outstanding differences to be signalized. In Canada musical criticism of recitals given by artistically trained amateurs and by professional virtuosi, of choral concerts, accompanied or *a cappella*, of orchestral concerts, with or without vocal or instrumental soloists, and of chamber-music concerts adopts three methods, and, according to the method adopted by a particular critic, aims at one or other of three results in aesthetic appreciation and culture.

As regards methods, musical criticism in Canada either is strictly technical, dealing with the excellences or defects of the form and structure, of the melodic and harmonic treatment, of vocal and instrumental compositions, and with the formal and expressive artistry of a soloist, choir, orchestra, or string-quartet. Or, again, it is technico-literary, mixing a modicum of the first method with literary appreciations of a solo recital, choral, orchestral, or chamber-music concert, and from the point of view of general aesthetic and artistic appeal, spiced with humanized comments on the charms, mannerisms, idiosyncrasies, or personality of a soloist, and on the display of dexterous musicianship by a choir or a band of instrumentalists. Or, finally, it is wholly literary as such, being but the expression on paper of a cultured critic's private aesthetic appreciations under the spell of the music, of his personal experiences, motor, sensuous,

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sentimental, suggested, imaginative, and transporting, which the music excites in his whole vital nature. Sometimes, as an element of mere news, the literary critic of musical recitals and concerts adds to his aesthetic appreciations a background of polite personalities and other report of interesting social fact noted by him in the concert-hall, after the manner of the technico-literary critics of musical performances.

For representatives of the strictly technical method of musical criticism in Canada, I must hark back to Dr. A. S. Vogt, Mr. W. O. Forsyth, and Mr. Robert S. Pigott, when those notable musicians and composers practised musical journalism and criticism, and for present-hour technical critics, I mention Mr. A. W. Palmer, Mr. John Adamson, Mr. Leo Smith, and Mr. Ludwig von Kunitz. For representatives of the technico-literary method, I cite Mr. Edwin R. Parkhurst, Mr. Hector Charlesworth, Mr. Fred Jacob, Mr. Augustus Bridle, and the present writer. For outstanding representatives of the strictly literary method, I cite Mrs. John W. Garvin (Katherine Hale, pseud.) and Mr. A. E. S. Smythe. If any one should animadvert that I have confined my list of representative critics of music in Canada to those dwelling in Toronto, and have not even hinted at the existence of other critics active in Ottawa, Montreal, Winnipeg, Calgary, and Vancouver, to such a captious censor I reply, in passing, that I have done so, because I am not writing an encyclopaedic "Who's Who" of Canadian musical critics, because Toronto is the literary and the musical metropolis of Canada, and because, therefore, the chief musical critics of that city are typical of all others in the Dominion.

Reverting to the methods of musical criticism in Canada, I submit that inasmuch as the principles of musical composition are, of all the fine arts, the most recondite, most formally abstract and rigorous, the greatest—appallingly so—in number, and the most difficult to learn and retain in the memory, and the knowledge of them the least distributed even amongst the cultured, this species of aesthetic criticism is the most esoteric, the least readable and read, and, therefore, the least effective in advancing the appreciation of music, in cultivating fine taste in

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music, and in elevating the standards of musical art and performance in Canada. The thoroughly competent critic of music and musical performances must have a sound knowledge of the theory, the history, the morphology, and the aesthetics of music in general, and considerable knowledge of vocal technics and scoring and of instrumentation and orchestration in particular. In addition, he must have positive literary gifts and training—more so than other critics, on account of the mathematical abstractness of the principles of musical composition, their remoteness from the culture of the otherwise aesthetically cultivated, and their repellant dryness when employed baldly or too technically in written criticism. On the other hand, to be readable, read, appreciated, and effective, musical criticism, even by a thoroughly competent critic, requires on the part of music-lovers an all-round musical education practically the equal of the critic's.

Now, on both sides, on that of the critic of music and on that of the music-loving public, such special education or culture as is necessary to the appreciation and to the effectiveness of authentic musical criticism is an ideal spiritual condition even in an old country having a long established civilization. How much more, then, must it be remotely ideal, and impossible, in a country like Canada, which has as yet but an inchoate civilization and a short history in cultivating the appreciation of the fine arts. It is plain, therefore, that the technical method of musical criticism has, and can have at present, very little, if any vogue and influence on musical appreciation, culture, and standards in Canada. The best, the most engaging, and the most culturally effective musical criticism written in the Dominion is that which is done by the critics who employ the technico-literary method or the strictly literary method. As Mr. Parkhurst, Mr. Charlesworth, Mr. Jacob, and Mr. Bridle write the one, it is well done, ranking in truth, sincerity, humanized employment of technical phraseology and orientation, convincingness, literary style and readableness, quite with the criticism by the best musical journalists in the United States, such as Philip Hale, Henry T. Finck, Henry Krebiel, Lawrence Gilman, and Felix Borowski. As Mrs. Garvin and Mr. Smythe write the other,

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it, too, is well done, affecting the sensibilities and the imagination like a sort of sensuous poetry of winsome earthly gardens of delight, or transporting the soul away from earth to ethereal spaces where heavenly voices chorus ineffably. It is full of radiant color or of a grey-eyed loveliness, and has a gentle musical accompaniment of its own. It is at once a kind of painting, poetry, and music, aesthetically winning and spiritually refreshing. In short, the literary appreciation of music is prose-poetry, pure literature; it is not authentic, constructive criticism. For this in Canada we must turn to the writings of those gentlemen—Messrs. Parkhurst, Charlesworth, Jacob, and Bridle—who employ the technico-literary method of musical criticism. This is the same method employed by Mr. Newton MacTavish in his essays in pictorial criticism, which we saw to be (p. 19) “unsophisticated, though knowing and thorough; disinterested, though direct and pointed; impersonal, though not aloof; humane, though just; and readable, though refined in literary expression.” The technico-literary appreciation of music in Canada has the same qualities and the same status as authoritative pictorial criticism. In these regards it ranks notably well with the best journalistic musical criticism written in the United States and in England.

As regards the aims of musical criticism in Canada, I am able to despatch summarily what I have to note about that matter. The aim of a given critic depends on the method he employs. The technical critic undertakes to inform the musically trained laymen, musicians, and composers as to the excellences of a musical composition, to define its place in the world of tonal art, and to disclose how far forth a soloist, a choir, or a band of instrumentalists artistically and expressively delivered its structural, aesthetic, and imaginative beauties. The technical critic aims to furnish an esoteric *côterie* or guild with formal knowledge and intellectual pleasure. The literary musical critic uses a tonal composition and performance as material for writing prose-poetry, and for conveying to others, by word painting and by imaginative suggestion, the delights he experienced at a recital or a concert. He aims not to supply knowledge, but to furnish

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aesthetic pleasure. The technico-literary critic of music combines technical and aesthetic ends, for a threefold purpose, namely, to distribute amongst the people a decent knowledge of the structural and of the expressive elements of music, to cultivate the people's taste, and to elevate the standards of musical performances. His aims, in short, are pedagogic, cultural, and artistic. He is *par excellence* the constructive critic, enhancing civilization and culture.

In Canada, therefore, it is to the Constructive Critics of literature, pictorial art, dramatic and musical performances, not to the Traditionalists, the Academics, the Dilettantes, the Technicists, and the Aesthetes, that the people of the Dominion must turn for enlightenment on matters concerning the development of the fine arts in their own country, for encouragement persistently to cultivate aesthetic taste, for direction in establishing artistic standards, and for incitement to essay original creation in the fine arts. The genuinely competent Constructive Critic knows intuitively and realizes vividly that for a young country, as for a novice in any of the fine arts, there is no more salient truth than that concealed in the ancient maxim, *Ars longa, vita brevis*—the attainment of perfection in art requires long and unceasing effort, and the time allotted to achieve is brief. Realizing the deeper meaning of this maxim, the Constructive Critic is consciously obedient to the ideal of his function: strives, by independent, sincere, honest, and helpful criticism, to serve his country by thus holding up the ideal of fine artistry, fine taste, and high standards, and pointing the way to worthier attainments and greater achievements. Often his independence is threatened, his sincerity and honesty doubted, his helpfulness trammelled; but he is patient, fearless, and goes his way cheerily enduring. He knows that he is despised and rejected of the Academics, the Dilettantes, the Technicists, and the Aesthetes; but he possesses an inward comfort and solace and peace. For, along with those who create and immortalize Joy, he is an accepted servant in the House of Lady Beauty.

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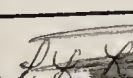

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